

The missionaries 'know their strength comes from God'

Record-Journal reporter Dan Champagne recently spent nine days in La Romana, Dominican Republic, with missionaries from this area. Here is another installment of his Dominican Journal.



Stories and photos by
Dan Champagne
Record-Journal

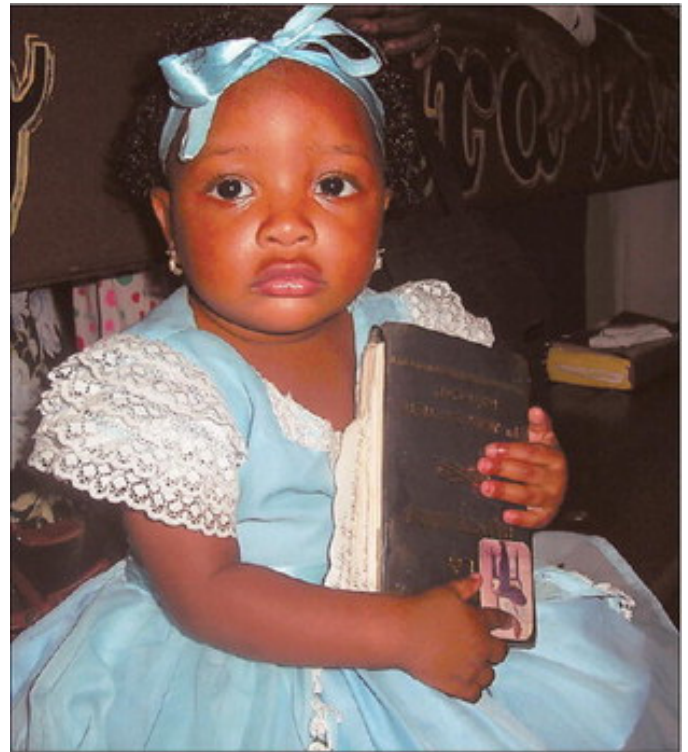
THEY PRAYED every morning. They prayed before meals and before long bus trips. They prayed when someone wasn't feeling well and for the continued health of those who were.

Religion was an undeniable force during the Dominican Republic Mission Team's trip to La Romana, with many of the nearly 70 volunteers coming from the First Baptist Church of Wallingford.

"This for them is clearly not the Peace Corps and is clearly not the Red Cross," said the Rev. William Huegel of First Baptist. "It's fairly clear to everyone who comes on this trip that the spiritual side is extremely important to us.

"They know their strength during this trip comes from God because they know they don't have enough in themselves," he said. "I always say that I am the luckiest pastor on earth. I get to hang out with some great kids who love God." Sarah Bolles, 18, took her third trip to La Romana this summer. She said her faith was as much a part of her trips as the airplane and The Good Samaritan Hospital.

"I don't think I would have the strength to come down here and make it through the week without my faith," Bolles said. "If I didn't believe that God was watching over me, I wouldn't be here." Bolles, a 2006 Sheehan High School graduate, plans to attend Nyack College in New York in the fall, where she will study psychology and pastoral ministries. She eventually wants to get a master's degree in Christian counseling.



A young girl holds a Bible at the Haitian Missionary Baptist Church in La Romana.

"Many of our kids who join us have gotten it," Huegel said. "They understand their relationship to God through Christ. They have made peace with God and their faith means everything to them. It makes them want to make a difference in the world." Although the trip was decidedly Christian, not everyone shared the same beliefs.

Devika Dhandapani, a Wallingford resident and senior at the University of Connecticut, took the trip for the fourth time. She is Hindu, but said her religion has never been an issue.

"I was definitely a little hesitant when I first thought about coming and I wanted to come because I'm interested in international medicine and urban issues," Dhandapani said. "My religion wasn't the first question everyone asked me, and I

was so overwhelmed with how nice everyone was. They were all very open to my beliefs. They seemed OK with it.” Huegel said he has been extremely impressed with Dhan dapani’s attitude over the last four years, although he would prefer if she were Christian.

“Frankly I would love it if she embraced Christ, but that’s not up to me,” he said. “I want that for her because I want that for everybody. She considers herself a spiritual person, whatever that means to her, and coming on this trip is her way of saying that she accepts and respects all of us.” “I learned about Christianity on the trips and I’m always interested in learning all that I can,” she said. “I’ve been to some services and I still respect all the devotionals. You just have to adjust to it a little, but I’ve never felt as if my religion or spirituality has gotten in the way on this trip.” Dhandapani wanted to go on the trip so much this year that she gave up some of the more fun outings, such as the beach, to study for her Medical College Admission Test (MCAT) coming up this month. She is working on a double major in physiology and neurobiology along with urban and community studies.

“Together in heaven”

Dana Basilicato didn’t quite know what to expect during the trip, her first. Basilicato, a Southington resident and mother of two, is Jewish.

“I thought I wanted to come on the trip to give back and I came because I wanted to feel useful as a person, to get a feeling that I was needed somewhere,” Basilicato said. “When I got here, I found out it wasn’t about me anymore. It was like they really needed me here.” She said she felt a bit like an outcast at times during the trip and added she heard some comments about the way she dressed. She shot back by calling herself a “Jewish princess” and saying “say convert” when snapping pictures. “I knew what I was getting into,” said Basilicato who skipped most of the devotional and church sessions. “It wasn’t that bad, but there were a few times when I felt it was an issue.

“The biggest problem I’ve had this week is that they serve pork for almost every meal,” she said with a laugh. “I’ve been living on peanut butter.” The Good Samaritan Hospital, where many of the volunteers worked during the week, is a Baptist hospital run through the Haitian Missionary Baptist Church.



Above: The choir of the Haitian Missionary Baptist Church.



Left: The Rev. William Huegel of the First Baptist Church in Wallingford preaches there.

The group stayed in dormitories at the church and ate in its dining hall.

More than 30 volunteer groups visit the area each year to work on the hospital and build churches, schools and shelters in the sugarcane fields. They come from all types of religious and economic backgrounds.

“We are a Baptist church and hospital, but we are helped very much by other religions,” said Moises Sifren, administrator of The Good Samaritan Hospital. “It doesn’t matter to me what people’s religions are. In the end, we will all be together in heaven.”

dchampagne@record-journal.com (203) 317-2227